Chapter 3
From the Assembly to Council Democracy: Towards a Prefigurative Form of Government?

Against the anarchist reading of prefiguration as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old', prefigurative democracy may also be understood as an attempt to challenge and reshape society's political form. This gives rise to the question whether prefigurative democracy also implies a particular, substantive idea of what such a political form should look like. Is prefiguration merely a formal concept, which could be applied in the context of any social movement, irrespective of their concrete political aspirations (Raekstad and Gradin 2020: 36)? Or is it also underpinned by a distinctively prefigurative view of democratic organisation or government? To speak with Claude Lefort, does prefigurative democracy imply a particular *mise en forme*, *mise en sens* and *mise en scène*?

There is also another reason to raise this question at this point. In the previous chapter I interpreted prefiguration as a politics without ends. I argued that its practitioners are not primarily concerned with the question how, or when, their practices will eventually come to a close. This also means that prefigurative movements often seek their own continuation: they typically try to prolong and expand their own practices as long as possible. But, as political theorists have argued in the wake of recent occupy movements, if prefigurative democracy is to sustain over time it will need to acquire a more durable organisational form and structure (Hardt and Negri 2017: 224). This leads to a certain tension. For how can a democratic politics that is characterised by its open-endedness and spontaneity, its experimental and experiential character, and its immediate experience of freedom be formalised without compromising on precisely these aspects? Might any attempt to institutionalise prefigurative democracy not also entail the loss of precisely these distinctive features?

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What might a more durable institutional form for prefigurative democracy look like? In order to answer this question we may first need to ask what kind of institutions, policies and procedures can already be seen to be taking shape within the practices and structures of contemporary prefigurative movements. One form of organisation that has been widely employed by many recent movements is the public assembly. A number of key features have been be attributed to the assembly form. The assembly is a public encounter between people with different experiences and perspectives. But precisely by virtue of this, it challenges established hierarchical relations and forms of leadership. The assembly also has an important bodily aspect in that it lays claim to public space through the act of physical assembling. It is a notably prefigurative form in that it entails the enactment of new social and political conditions. The public assembly is also often regarded as a symbolic expression of the popular will. In being so, however, it precisely inscribes the established idea of 'the people' with a new meaning. At the same time, such assemblies have a rather temporary and fleeting character: sooner or later, they disperse again. It thus is questionable to what extent it may resolve the elementary tension between the open-endedness of prefigurative democracy on the one hand, and its need for a more durable institutional form on the other.

How might a more permanent, institutional shape be given to prefigurative democracy? Is there a way to retain some of its prefigurative features, or might it even give rise to a particular kind of democratic government? As we will see below, several recent social movements eventually turned to another institutional form, in an attempt to achieve precisely this. They sought to establish durable networks of democratic councils or neighbourhood assemblies that would outlive the temporary public assemblies on their occupied squares. In order to better understand this move towards the establishment of council democracy, I return to Hannah Arendt. Drawing from Arendt's idea of a 'council system' (and from some of her most important sources, most notably Rosa Luxemburg), I argue how political councils may accommodate prefigurative democracy and give it a more durable form in the long term.

Contemporary Social Movements and the Public Assembly

> As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all

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> people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies. (New York City General Assembly 2012: 148–9)

Thus begins the 'Declaration of Occupation', which was unanimously accepted by OWS's General Assembly on 29 September 2011. The declaration then continues to list the many wrongs and injustices of the capitalist order and its democratic deficits, and finally calls upon the 'people of the world' to 'assert [its] power':

> Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone. . . . Join us and make your voices heard! (New York City General Assembly 2012: 148–9)

This declaration can be read in two complementary ways. On the one hand, it is a founding document that proclaims 'the assembly' as a political space or body. Thus conceived, the assembly is a self-constituent body that is itself assembled of different bodies – it is in a state of being assembled. In this declaration, the assembly bestows upon itself a certain authority to speak on behalf of a larger group or constituency. On the other hand, OWS's declaration can also be read as an appeal: members of the public are invited to join the assembly, and to take part in its continuous process of collective deliberation and decision-making. The assembly could thus also be understood as a practice or activity of assembling. It is both a political body that authors and authorises its own declaration, and, at the same time, the continuous practice that this declaration calls for. Indeed, in the course of the past decade many social movements around the world have answered this call by organising their own public assemblies. But what explains the prominence of this particular organisational form in the practices of these recent movements? How does it cater to, and why does it often seem to emerge from, a prefigurative view of democracy?

In the wake of these occupy movements, many radical political theorists have sought to conceptualise the public assembly as a democratic expression or practice as well as a form of organisation. Judith Butler (Butler 2011b, 2015; Butler and Antanasiou 2013) has employed their performative theory of gender in the context of what they call 'assembly movements' in order to better understand their constitutive and symbolic relevance. Verónica Gago (2020) engages with the assembly in the context of feminist movements

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in Latin America and stresses their radically pluralist and ontologically diverse composition. In a similar fashion, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2012, 2017) understand the assembly as the organisational form of the 'multitude' and recommend how this form could acquire more durability and strategic effect in the long term. Isabell Lorey (2014, 2020) presents the assembly as a distinctively 'presentist' form of democracy, which is devoid of political representation and its imputed hierarchies. Approaching the public assembly from a more historical perspective, however, Jason Frank precisely interprets it as 'a distinctive – and distinctively powerful – mode of democratic representation' (2021: xiv). In short, not only has the assembly been analysed in different ways, but various (and at times incompatible) features and functions have been ascribed to it in the recent debate. Let us briefly flesh out a number of these key aspects and show how various accounts of the public assembly deviate from each other.

A first feature of the public assembly is that it creates an encounter – or, to be more precise: that it *is* an encounter – between a wide plurality of social groups or individuals who may share particular grievances or concerns, but who nevertheless have very different experiences or identities. According to Hardt and Negri, it is informed by a 'logic of assemblage', which combines or brings together its various parts not on the basis of shared characteristics, but on the basis of possible connections between them (2017: 295). Recent assembly movements thus 'affirm a beating heart of plural ontology' in that they 'create a model of constituent democracy in which differences are able to interact and together create new institutions' (Hardt and Negri 2017: 69). The assembly establishes a common ground between various conflicts and struggles, and broadens the understanding of its participants and their ability to identify with each other, without ignoring or nullifying the significant differences between them (Gago 2020: 156). According to some sources, this suggests that the assembly form is underpinned by a typically feminist critique of political representation. Sara Ahmed (2017: 30) explains how feminist analysis of sexism in both its structural and everyday forms starts with collecting individual stories and experiences and establishing the various connections between them. In a similar fashion, Gago defines the assembly as a 'mobile structuration of a political process led by a multiplicity of subjectivities that traverse different conflicts' (2020: 176). It refutes any form of political representation – which, according to some feminist scholars,

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is inherently masculine as it is majority-based and establishes at least some measure of hierarchy and exclusion (Lorey 2020: 148–9). According to Isabell Lorey, the assembly instead exemplifies a 'presentist' and essentially open or undetermined form of democracy (Lorey 2020: 196–8). It neither has a predetermined organisational form or structure, nor does it 'stand for' a particular circumscribed 'people' or 'nation' (Lorey 2014: 60; 2020: 17–18). Being a radically pluralist and inclusive encounter, in the assembly no experience or identity is subordinated to another.

A second, and related, characteristic that is often ascribed to the assembly is that it challenges traditional forms of hierarchy, rulership and vertical leadership. Many recent public assemblies typically employed participatory and consensus-oriented forms of democratic decision-making. Initially, they thus were widely regarded as the exponents of a distinctively 'leaderless' or 'horizontalist' form of democracy (Hardt and Negri 2012; Mason 2012; Sitrin 2012; Tormey 2015). But this initial interpretation of the assembly as a 'leaderless' form of organisation has also been challenged from various perspectives. To begin with, and notwithstanding its strong appeal, the accuracy of this image is disputable. Many recent public assemblies arguably did depend on, and gave rise to, certain forms of political leadership (Nunes 2014; Smucker 2017). The idea of 'leaderlessness' may thus render invisible certain power relations or inequalities that nevertheless do emerge within a social movement. This could easily feed into what Jo Freeman (1972) famously called a 'tyranny of structurelessnesss'. When formal leadership roles are lacking in a social movement, those who are de facto in powerful positions cannot be held accountable. It may therefore be more productive and informative to ask how the assembly gives rise to alternative, more fluctuating and diverse forms of leadership. Paolo Gerbaudo (2012: 39–44) has compared the assembly with a choreography, which is scripted, casted and staged in advance by movement organisers on social media and other digital platforms. Rodrigo Nunes, in turn, argues that the assembly serves to 'distribute' leadership roles, which can be 'occupied by different agents at different times' (2021: 180). Rather than imagining the democratic social movement as being 'leaderless' it may thus be more descriptively accurate as well as politically empowering to construe them as intrinsically leaderful (Smucker 2017: 186). Hardt and Negri agree that, in order to effectively pursue radical change at a structural and institutional level, some forms of 'tactical leadership' may need to

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be formalised. However, they maintain that the assembly could continue to play an elementary role in determining the long-term aims and strategies of the multitude (2017: 19). Can the public assembly be imagined at all as a durable democratic institution? I will return to this question further below.

A third important feature of the assembly, which is stressed most markedly by feminist scholars, is its bodily aspect. Although social media have come to play a prominent role in the mobilisation and practical organisation of social movements (Castells 2015; Gerbaudo 2012; Swann 2018), the physical aspect of public assembling clearly has also retained its relevance over time (Frank 2021: 1–2). Judith Butler thus theorises the assembly as 'bodies in alliance', which has two important implications. On the one hand, it means that the assembly can only emerge between bodies that are gathered in public and that, in the act of assembling, lay claim to public space. Following Arendt in this respect, Butler thus attributes an important constitutive function to collective political action. Both as a political practice and a physical gathering, the assembly realises the conditions for its own emergence (Butler 2015: 71). At the same time, this also means that the assembly constitutes itself *as* a gathering of bodies – each with their own physical or material needs, vulnerabilities and deprivations. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the everyday aspects of daily life in the occupied square are by no means of secondary importance. Instead, Butler argues, it was precisely by 'sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems for sharing the space' – in short, by 'maintaining themselves as persistent bodies' – that its participants gave expression to their grievances and demands (Butler 2015: 97). It would thus be a mistake to assume, as is often done, that assembly movements such as OWS or 15-M did not make any demands. It is precisely by performing aspects of their daily life in public that these movements enacted the kind of 'relations of equality that are lacking in the economic and political domain' (Butler and Antanasiou 2013: 102).

This brings us to a fourth, and related aspect of the public assembly: it both enacts and creates the conditions that are needed to overcome the contested status quo. Butler employs their performative theory of gender in order to explain this. Gender is performative in that it is constituted by its enactment in practice. Specific gendered features in one's behaviour or appearance are thus not merely the manifestations or expressions of an already-existing identity, but are

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themselves co-constitutive of the very way in which someone is gendered (Butler 1990: 34). Much in the same way, Butler argues, the public assembly may be understood as a performative enactment of the social and political change that it pursues. First, as we have seen, it performs the physical and material conditions that the establishment of a more just and equal society requires. Second, the assembly enacts new conceptions of the good life and the principles on which it can be based (Butler 2015: 218–19). Finally, the assembly is also a performance of popular sovereignty. It is the enunciation of a 'we the people' (Butler 2011a). In fact, Butler stresses, 'the assembly is already speaking before it utters any words', in that merely by its coming together in public 'it is already an enactment of a popular will' (2015: 156). Oliver Marchart (2019: 176–88) speaks in a similar fashion of the assembly as the 'pre-enactment' of how activists imagine an alternative future.

A final element that is sometimes ascribed to the assembly form is its aesthetic or symbolic function. Jason Frank has reconstructed the historical role of popular assemblies in the imagination or representation of 'the people' in modern democracies. Whilst 'the people' is generally held to be the ultimate source of political authority in a democracy, it is only rarely (if ever) visible as such. But throughout the past centuries the assembly has often been perceived as the most tangible manifestation of popular sovereignty, especially in revolutionary moments and times of political crisis (Frank 2021: 40). It presents a 'living image' of the people, to itself as a people. However, the assembly does more than simply represent 'the people' – it also reinscribes it (and whatever understanding it has of itself) with new meaning and content. As 'both the authorizing source and the effect of representation', it sets 'into motion the condition for the emergence of new collectivities and political subjects' (Frank 2021: 9). A paradox thus seems to inhere in the form of the assembly: on the one hand, it is historically taken to be the most immediate expression of a popular will; and on the other hand, this popular will is also at least partially formed or articulated by the assembly itself. Frank insists that this is not merely a juridical problem, as is often assumed in theoretical debates on constituent power, but also an aesthetic one. How is it possible that a numerical minority, as gathered in, for instance, Tahrir Square of Zuccotti Park, can legitimately and convincingly present itself as the embodiment of an entire population and its shared grievances or aspirations (Frank 2021: 70)?

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I have thus identified a number of aspects that have been ascribed to the assembly form in the wake of its repeated emergence in the past decade. The assembly establishes a radically pluralistic encounter between various experiences or perspectives; it challenges traditional forms of hierarchy and vertical leadership; it emerges between bodies that, in the act of gathering, lay claim to public space; it implies a performative enactment of the very social conditions that allow its emergence in the first place; and finally, the assembly inscribes the idea of 'the people' as the ultimate source of popular sovereignty with a new meaning or content. There clearly are tensions between these various aspects and theorisations of the public assembly. For instance, whereas Lorey conceptualises the assembly as an example of 'presentist' democracy, Frank insists that it fulfils an elementary role in the symbolic representation of 'the people'. As I will argue in the next chapter, the widespread idea that recent social movements such as OWS or 15-M embodied a 'presentist' or even an explicitly anti-representative idea of democracy relies on a limited conception of 'representation' to begin with. Prefigurative democracy does, in fact, require at least some forms of representative claim-making. At the same time, public assemblies do typically emerge in times of democratic crisis, when the legitimacy of representative institutions, or their ability to fulfil this role in practice, is widely disputed. So, if the public assembly can at all be understood to represent 'the people', then it does so in a different way than the forms of representative government whose legitimacy it seeks to contest.

One question that has not been addressed, however, is whether the public assembly can also acquire a sufficiently durable institutional form to accommodate prefigurative democracy in the long term. As I argue in the next section, the experiences of contemporary social movements suggest that it cannot. Many of these movements eventually turned towards a different organisational form: that of the council.

A Prefigurative Form of Government?

The public assembly is typically prefigurative in that it establishes a political form and enacts social conditions that may characterise a radically different, future society in the here and now. However, as is also suggested in several of its theorisations discussed above, assembling is not a continuous practice. If only for practical

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reasons, it cannot be endlessly maintained. But arguably also at a more conceptual level, assemblies have a fleeting and temporary character. Butler describes them as 'anarchist moments or anarchist passages' that emerge 'when the legitimacy of a regime or its laws is called into question, but when no new legal regimen has yet arrived to take its place' (2015: 75). They 'form unexpectedly and dissolve under voluntary or involuntary conditions' (Butler 2015: 7). A public gathering must inevitably disperse at some point. Although the General Assembly and consensus-oriented decision-making procedures in Zuccotti Park were inspiring examples of prefigurative experimentation, OWS activist Astra Taylor reflects, 'I never believed I had joined a credible example of a better form of government. I had read enough about the history of protest movements to know that the assembly would break down' (Taylor 2019: 50).

This is not to say that such public assemblies cannot lead to meaningful political or societal change. The assembly does intervene in ordinary politics: it mobilises or politicises its participants, informs political debate or public discourse, and provides 'the people' with new sources of identification. It may remind us of the fact that 'another world is possible' and possibly stimulate the imagination of what this 'other world' might look like. To this extent, public assemblies not only have a prefigurative character but they can also have a significant and lasting impact. What the assembly does not do, however, is durably intervene in the institutional form of society in order to reshape it. It does not give rise to new institutional and organisational forms that have the capacity – let alone the pretension or aspiration – to outlive the moment of assembly. But prefigurative democracy must arguably go further than a mere (pre-)enactment of an alternative society in the here and now. Although it does, indeed, have an important performative or aesthetic aspect, prefigurative democracy does more than merely reimagine or enact what a radically different society might look like. As Hardt and Negri argue (2017: 69), a social movement worth its salt should not only seek to 'animate and incarnate new human relationships but also to participate from below in the construction of new institutions'.

Indeed, this is precisely what many recent prefigurative movements set out to do. Although many of them initially emerged in the form of a public assembly, those that were not swiftly repressed often continued to look for a more permanent institutional form. Various examples could be given. In Spain, several branches of the

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15-M movement sought to institutionalise at a local level by setting up neighbourhood councils (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 144–6). Others chose to participate in municipal elections, in an attempt to democratise the existing representative institutions from within (Ordónez et al. 2018). In the wake of Nuit Debout and the Yellow Vest (Gilets jaunes) movement in France, hundreds of so-called 'citizens lists' or 'participatory lists' have emerged on the ballots for local elections (Dau 2020). Many of them have also been organised in a nationwide network with the ultimate aim of creating a new and federated structure for democratic governance alongside established institutions (Legros 2020). In revolutionary Syria, activists have set up community councils to both coordinate resistance against Assad's regime and eventually replace it after its withdrawal (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016: 68–73; Aziz 2013).

The most telling example of such attempts to institutionalise prefigurative democracy is offered by OWS. In the course of October 2011, the occupiers of Zuccotti Park decided to replace their General Assembly (GA) as its most important body of decision-making with a 'spokescouncil'. In the first weeks of OWS's existence, all decisions with respect to both the movement's strategy and the organisation of daily life within the occupied square were formally taken in a daily meeting within the occupied square itself. Everyone present was welcome to participate in the deliberation – and, in principle, everyone was able to veto any decision. Working groups with different thematic focuses and responsibilities would work out proposals for deliberation in the GA and implement its eventual decisions. It soon became clear that, notwithstanding its strong mobilising potential and symbolic appeal (Cornell 2011), the GA was unfit for long-term strategising and efficient organisation (Bray 2013: 88–91). The occupiers thus turned to a different organisational model, in which every working group would be represented by an appointed delegate or 'spoke' in a so-called 'spokescouncil'. Delegation rotated on a regular basis. During council meetings each delegate would be seated with their own working group members who could provide input to the spokes (Graeber 2013: 232), but only designated delegates would be allowed to directly address the meeting (Bray 2013: 88). Of course, the introduction of this spokescouncil system did not remain uncontested. Some members of OWS feared that this shift would render the decision-making process less accessible and inclusive, or that the movement would gradually come to resemble a political party (Gould-Wartofsky 2015: 125; Gray 2011).

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One striking feature all of these examples have in common is that, in one way or another, they eventually all opted for a similar institutional form: the council. Some movements and activists tried to engage with already-existing representative councils (mostly at a municipal level) in an attempt to change them from within. Others instead tried to set up their own council system outside of the established liberal-democratic institutions. There are many more examples of recent social movements with prefigurative inclinations that have also employed the council as an institutional form. The EZLN or Zapatista Movement in south Mexico is organised from the bottom up through local 'Good Government Councils' (Oikonomakis 2019: 129). And during the past decade, the Kurdish independence movement has pursued the establishment of confederated council systems against and outside of the nation-state in Turkish (TATORT 2013) as well as north Syrian territory (Knapp et al. 2016: 51–3). In South African shack settlements, citizens organised in local councils or *amakomiti* have established dual power alongside the formal institutions of the state or municipality. As many of these settlements were illegally erected, its inhabitants initially had no choice but to organise themselves. Today, some of these committees operate in conjunction with state or ANC (African National Congress) officials, whereas in other cases the relationship with public offices remains more antagonistic. According to Trevor Ngwane (2021: 146), they may give at least a partial impression of what a democratic workers' state might look like. Another recent example on a much smaller scale is Cooperation Jackson, a network of worker cooperatives in Jackson, Mississippi, that seeks to establish a solidarity-based economy and democratic self-determination for the impoverished black community (Akuno and Nangwaya 2017). At an institutional level, Cooperation Jackson has pursued different complementary strategies: on the one hand, several of its leaders have successfully taken part in municipal and mayoral elections. At the same time, the organisation has also set up durable 'people's assemblies' that give input to city-wide policy debates and provide a platform for participatory democracy and the bottom-up organisation of various cooperatives.

These various examples suggest that, in the long term, the institutional form of the democratic council better caters to a prefigurative democracy than the public assembly. But why would this be the case? In the next section I return to the political thought of Arendt. Throughout her oeuvre, she too grapples with this problem

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of how the distinctive freedom, open-endedness and spontaneity of political action could survive its own institutionalisation (Kalyvas 2008: 192). In an attempt to resolve this problem, Arendt discusses various historical forms of government – ranging from the ancient Greek *polis* to the early US Republic. In the next section, I briefly reconstruct a number of features that she attributes to these various governmental forms. Arendt eventually hypothesises that only one organisational form is able to resolve the tension between action and institutionalisation: that of the council, which emerged in various revolutions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.[1]

Between Action and Institution: From the *Polis* to Revolutionary Councils

Arendt's conception of political action is radically open-ended and characterised by an immediate experience of freedom. But this also means that there is always a certain fleetingness to it: the impact or outcome of one's deeds and words can never be foretold. We inevitably act in a condition of uncertainty about where, when and how our political practices will come to an end. Political action thus is precarious in the sense that it has nothing but its own 'actuality' to hold on to (Arendt 1958: 206). Consequently, those engaged in political action often seek to sustain practice as long as possible. But how can such a fleeting moment be kept alive? And how have others tried to resolve this tension between the open-endedness of political action and its need for a durable institutional form?

A first historical form of government that Arendt often engages with is the *polis*. It is sometimes suggested that Arendt idealises the ancient Greek city-state. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is not so much the institutional form of the *polis* that intrigues her, but the idea of political action and community by which it is underpinned. According to Arendt, the ancient Greeks did not see their *polis* primarily as a material or juridical space. It rather was construed as a space that appears between people whenever they convene to act and speak in each other's presence. As Pericles put it, 'wherever you go, you will be a *polis*' (Arendt 1958: 198). What distinguishes the *polis* from other spheres, then, is that it was characterised by *isonomia* – or the principle that everyone is free to act as equals in the public sphere (Balibar 2014: 169). It is by virtue of a shared citizenship that, in this realm, no one could

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rule or be ruled (Arendt 1958: 32; 2005a: 118; 2006a: 20–1). Seen from this perspective, then, the formal laws and institutions of the *polis* merely served to accommodate and protect this space of freedom and equality. Arendt compares the ancient Greek conception of law (or *nomos*) with a city wall that encircles the political realm – thus giving the deeds and words of its citizens a less fleeting and more durable character. However, this 'wall-like law' was itself not considered a subject of political debate: constructing these boundaries of bricks and laws was a fabrication process, and not the matter of politics itself (1958: 194–5).

An entirely different conception of law, in this respect, is implied in the political structure of the Roman Republic. For the Romans, law (or *lex*) had the form of a contract or treaty that originated in the foundation of their body politic (Arendt 2005a: 183). It established a 'formal relationship between people rather than [a] wall that separates them from others' (Arendt 1958: 63n62). Whereas the Greek *nomos* primarily served to contain and protect a distinctive political realm, the Romans did not differentiate between a 'pre-*polis* experience' of political action on the one hand, and its accommodation or protection by law and institutions on the other. Instead, they continuously returned to the founding contract on which their Republic was based, and to the principles that 'inspirited' this original beginning (Arendt 2006e: 120).[2] The Romans were well aware, however, that in order to preserve this original foundation it had to be continuously amended, expanded and augmented (Arendt 2006a:194). Legislation thus was not seen as a precondition or by-product of politics, but instead as its very matter (Arendt 1958: 63).

This interest in law as a foundation of the body politic is echoed in modern republicanism, and especially in the early US Republic. Although the American revolutionaries deliberately placed themselves in the Roman tradition, what distinguished them is that they could not refer back to an original foundation that had been passed on from generation to generation (Gündoğdu 2015: 174–5). As they had to found an entirely new republic, they thus were forced to seek the source of its legitimisation within itself. For the first time, the foundation of a body politic had 'occurred in broad daylight to be witnessed by all who were present' (Arendt 2006a: 197). This becomes most apparent in one of the opening statements of the *Declaration of Independence*: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are

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Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' In Arendt's reading, the first words of this performative statement immediately save it from its own arbitrariness, whilst avoiding any appeal to an originary source of authority (Kalyvas 2008: 246–7; Negri 1999: 16). It was among the revolutionaries assembled that a certain truth could be *held* as 'self-evident' (Arendt 2006a: 184–5). Its foundational principles were given by neither God nor tradition, but 'rested exclusively in the power of the performative "We hold"' (Honig 1993: 107). This revolutionary moment thus contained 'two elements which to us seem irreconcilable and even contradictory' (Arendt 2006a: 214): the exhilarating experience of making an entirely new beginning on the one hand, and the need to found it in a stable and durable legal structure on the other.

However, even the American revolutionaries proved unable to sustain this precarious balance between action and institutionalisation over time. Prior to and during the revolution, many citizens had been able to engage in public deliberation and self-organisation through their townships meetings. Even though the revolutionaries were to found an entirely new body politic, they could draw from their previous experiences in local wards and councils to give it a stable and durable institutional framework (Arendt 2006a: 158; Kalyvas 2008: 227). After the revolution, however, the 'founding fathers' hurried to install a system of representative government – whose primary aim, according to Arendt, was not so much to facilitate public participation through delegation, but instead to establish 'a popularly controlled rule of the people's representatives over the people' (Arendt 2006a: 228). In the newly founded republic there thus 'was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it' (Arendt 2006a: 224). It deprived the Americans of their 'proudest possession': the ability to act politically, to engage in public affairs and to begin something new (Arendt 2006a: 231).

In short, none of these historical forms of government – the ancient Greek *polis*, the Roman Republic, or eventually the US Republic – was able to definitively resolve the tension between action and institutionalisation. This is why, in various places scattered throughout her oeuvre, Arendt turns to another form of government: that of the revolutionary council. From the local townhall meetings in revolutionary America and the *sociétés* or revolutionary clubs during the French Revolution of 1789, to the Paris Commune of 1871; and from the *soviets* during the Russian Revolution of 1905 and

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the February Revolution of 1917, to the Kronstadt Rebellion, the Spartacist *Räte* of 1919, and the revolutionary councils in Hungary in 1956 – in all these various events throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, Arendt argues, the people 'have come forth, albeit never successfully, with another new form of government: the system of people's councils to take the place of the Continental party system' (Arendt 1958: 216; see also Arendt 2006a: 248). Although the council form has thus reappeared in virtually every important revolution of the past centuries, according to Arendt there is no immediate relationship between these revolutionary events. It emerged whenever the people were able to 'follow their own political devices without being spoon-fed by a party or steered by a government' (Arendt 2018c: 133).

Although Arendt rarely engages in speculation on the ideal political form of society, she nevertheless admits to having 'a romantic sympathy' with the revolutionary council (Arendt 2018b: 465), which she regards as one of the few appealing alternatives to electoral-representative government as we know it today (Arendt 1972b: 231). Various factors may have contributed to her preference for the council form. Arendt's mother had a great admiration for Rosa Luxemburg, who played a key role in the November revolution, and to whom Arendt would later devote an entire essay (Arendt 1968d; Young-Bruehl 2004: 27–8). Arendt's second husband, Heinrich Blücher, whom she met as a political refugee in Paris in the 1930s, had participated in the German revolution of 1918–19 as a member of Luxemburg's *Spartakusbund* (Muldoon 2016: 765–7; Young-Bruehl 2004: 124–5). It is also argued that Arendt's interest in councils and federalist forms of organisation were informed by her experiences with *kibbutzim* in Palestine, which she visited as an official for a Zionist organisation in 1935 (Muldoon 2016: 777). But it arguably was a historical event later on in her life that most aroused Arendt's interest in the council form: the Hungarian uprising of 1956 (Popp-Madsen 2021: 135–6). She included a new chapter on these events in the second edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (but again removed it from later editions), and returned to the phenomenon of revolutionary councils in several of her later writings, most notably in the last chapter of *On Revolution*. In these various places, Arendt draws the contours of what she calls a 'council system'.

In the following section I first reconstruct a number of key features that Arendt attributes to the revolutionary councils of the past

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centuries, and draw a comparison with the public assemblies of recent social movements. I argue that Arendt's council system provides a promising organisational form for prefigurative democracy as it has the potential to reconcile the freedom and open-endedness that inheres in political action with its need for institutionalisation.

A Lost Treasure: Arendt's 'Council System'

If Arendt's proposal for a council system is vague and sweeping (Canovan 1992: 237), this appears to be deliberate. Rather than to meticulously spell out the exact preconditions and features of the council form, she argues, 'it certainly is wiser to say with Jefferson, "Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments"' (2006a: 271). However, by reconstructing some of its key aspects it may nevertheless be possible to gain valuable insights about the possible form and role of institutions in radical democracy (Lederman 2019: 183). In some respects, the council may be understood to formalise or institutionalise certain features that we also encountered in recent public assemblies. First, Arendt claims that revolutionary councils emerge spontaneously and do not follow a pre-set plan. It is an intrinsically open-ended form of organisation that yields a high measure of spontaneity. Second, the council defies any form of hierarchy and rulership. In consequence, third, it implies a critique of traditional forms of political organisation, such as the political party. Fourth, Arendt attributes an important pedagogical function to the council. But there are also significant differences between the public assembly and the council form. A fifth feature is that the council does not serve a transitory or instrumental role, but is meant to outlive the revolutionary moment from which it emerges. Sixth, the council form can be employed in any social context and environment. It thus has an important politicising role. This also means, finally, that (unlike the public assembly) the council may strike a precarious balance between political action and its need for a durable institutional form. It may thus resolve the tension between action and its institutionalisation. Let me flesh out these various characteristics of the council form below.

A first feature of the revolutionary council, according to Arendt, is that it emerges spontaneously (Arendt 1972b: 231) and that none of its historical occurrences were planned or anticipated (Arendt 2006a: 248). Moreover, as much as the council is not the outcome of a pre-set plan, it does not serve to implement one, either. Arendt

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claims that in the Hungarian uprisings of 1956, 'no programs, points or manifestos played any role' (Arendt 2018c: 131). This inherent spontaneity and open-endedness of the council form stands in stark contrast with the theoretical model of revolution that would become dominant in the twentieth century: the idea that it was to be led by a professional organisation, which carried out a detailed programme (Arendt 2006a: 254). Arendt's insistence on the spontaneity and open-endedness of these revolutions resonates with one of Marx's observations on the Paris Commune of 1871. The Communards, he argued, had 'no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*' (2010a: 213). Their organisational form and political principles could only be found in political practice itself. In a similar vein, during the German revolution of 1918–19 many council communists held that the council form would naturally emerge as an evident form of self-organisation (Däumig 2012: 43; Gluckstein 2011: 33).

It must be stressed, however, that spontaneity or open-endedness should not be confused with a disdain for organisation per se (Breines 1989). As Rodrigo Nunes argues in the context of contemporary protest movements, they are rather two sides of the same coin. If one assumes that history does not run its inevitable course, and that the exact outcomes or consequences of one's actions can never be predicted, then the need for organisation in order to accommodate action becomes inevitable (Nunes 2021: 122). 'It is only by organising itself in however makeshift a way that any kind of spontaneous initiative can produce effects,' Nunes argues, 'yet it is only because an inclination to do something already exists that there is anything to organise' (Nunes 2021: 156). In a similar vein, Arendt refuses any such dichotomy between organisation and spontaneity. Rather, it was precisely the high rate of organisation within revolutionary movements and their ability to adapt to new situations that allowed these councils to spontaneously emerge in the first place.

A second characteristic of the council is that it defies any form of hierarchy or rulership. Arendt insists that in many of its historical occurrences, citizens 'were not content to discuss and "enlighten themselves" about measures that were already taken by parties or assemblies; they consciously and explicitly desired the direct participation of every citizen in the public affairs of the country' (2006a: 255). She thus draws a direct connection between the right to participate in debate and engage in public deliberation on the one hand, and the principle of self-organisation on the other. A formal right to free speech is meaningless as long as one is not also

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able to 'determine the political course' of society (Arendt 1972b: 232). This also implies that citizens must have the ability to speak and address each other as equals (Vergara 2020: 187–8). Thus perceived, the council may indeed be regarded as a modern realisation of the ancient Greek principle of *isonomia* – or 'to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled [exist]' (Arendt 1958: 33; see also Balibar 2014: 173). It is also at this point that Arendt's idea of a council system differs most significantly from representative government as we know it today. The latter is merely based on the principle that 'the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many' (Arendt 2006a: 261). The council, on the other hand, establishes political space devoid of rulership. But this does not mean that it should be understood as an attempt to formalise or perpetuate a state of unruliness. More accurately, Arendt suggests that the council is based on an entirely different conception of 'rule' or ἀρχή – namely, the ability of citizens to determine and rearticulate the principles on which their political order is based (Arendt 2006a: 205; Markell 2006: 13).

It is also precisely for this reason that political parties, and other hierarchical forms of political organisation, hardly played any role in these revolutionary councils. This is a third feature of the council, which again is shared by the public assemblies of recent occupy movements. Arendt claims that the councils challenged 'the party system as such' (2006a: 257). In fact, as Oskar Anweiler (one of Arendt's most important sources on this subject) argues, the council form historically predated the emergence of the party as a revolutionary agent (Anweiler 1974). It was only after the October Revolution that the party came to be regarded as the revolutionary agent par excellence. In the Soviet Union, which derived its name from these early councils or *soviets*, the council form could only outlive the revolution because it was formally subsumed under the party-state (Boggs 1977a: 101). However, even after 1917 council communists continued to dismiss the party form as a remnant of the old bourgeois order (Popp-Madsen and Kets 2021: 168). Otto Rühle argued that parties merely served an electoral-representative role (Rühle 2021: 91). Whereas the revolution could only result from workers' self-organisation, parties would always try to claim it as their own (Rühle 2021: 95). Arendt shares this concern: the aim of political parties has never been to empower or activate people, but to muster their support and act in their stead (Arendt 2006a: 260–5). Whereas both public assemblies and councils spring forth from

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political action itself, parties tend to see the revolution as their own product, and will always seek to lead it in the name of the people.

Since Arendt is a prominent critic of representative government and party politics, it is often assumed that she rejects political representation *tout court*. However, she by no means dismisses any form of representation. In fact, Arendt acknowledges that councils fulfil a certain representative role as well (Arendt 2018c: 137; Kalyvas 2008: 282). She imagines her council system as a pyramidal, federated system whose participants are self-selected at the lower levels and delegated at the higher ones (Arendt 2006a: 269–70; Disch 2011a: 352).[3] In this respect, Arendt stands in a longer tradition that favours federated or bottom-up forms of organisation (Van Outryve d'Ydewalle 2019). However, since it is the primary task of a council system to accommodate public debate and deliberation, according to Arendt, it follows that the delegates at its higher echelons cannot simply transfer the opinions or preferences of their constituency. They must be able to engage in some level of deliberation and decision-making themselves, and to make decisions on their constituencies' behalf. In Arendt's conception, the council form thus arguably holds 'a middle ground between what is sometimes described as the distinction between representation and delegation' (Lederman 2019: 188).

A fourth feature of the council is that it fulfils an important pedagogical function. This insight is derived from Rosa Luxemburg, who had a strong impact on Arendt's idea of the council (Blätter and Marti 2005). Although Arendt clearly was not a Marxist, it is argued that she and Luxemburg at least shared a certain republican inspiration (Arendt 1968d: 54). This also implies a pedagogical view of citizenship. Since long before the October Revolution, Luxemburg consistently criticised Lenin's 'mechanistic' idea of revolutionary organisation – which, she held, was largely modelled after the existing state form, the military and the factory (Luxemburg 1961a: 90). Whereas the Bolsheviks assumed that a vanguard of experienced revolutionaries should politicise and lead the working class towards liberation, Luxemburg insisted that 'the organisation of revolutionary actions can and must be learnt only in the revolution itself, much like swimming can only be learnt in the water' (1974b: 524, my translation; see also Nixon 2018: 105). When, during the November Revolution of 1918, revolutionary workers' councils emerged in various German cities, Luxemburg immediately recognised their essential pedagogical function. It was often far from

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clear for what purpose these council systems had been established, or how they should be operated. Yet, she argued, 'this is not a lack, but rather the normal state of affairs. . . . The workers will learn in the school of action' (1971: 406).[4] Thus perceived, the council also caters to the ideal of what the ancient Greeks used to call *paideia* (παιδεία): the lifelong political education of citizens through participation and the exercise of critical thinking in the public realm (Bookchin 1995a: 63–4; Castoriadis 1997: 11). Recent public assemblies fulfilled a similar pedagogical function, albeit temporarily. But this is at the same time an important difference between the assembly and the council: if *paideia* must indeed be regarded as a lifelong and open-ended practice, then it arguably requires a more durable institutional framework in which learning practices can be nourished and sustained.

A fifth feature of the council is that it does not serve a transitory or instrumental role, but instead is often meant to outlive the revolutionary moment from which it emerges. In Arendt's reading, the council proposes itself as an 'entirely new form of government' (Arendt 2006a: 241; Gluckstein 2011: 45). This view of the council stands in stark contrast with that of most orthodox Marxists, who merely see it as a revolutionary instrument. Marx and Lenin interpreted the Paris Commune as a first attempt to establish a transitory proletarian state that should eventually give rise to a post-political, communist society (Lenin 1987: 312). The Bolsheviks, in turn, discarded the *soviets* as soon as their strategic purpose had been fulfilled (Anweiler 1974: 165). Rosa Luxemburg and the council communists, on the other hand, regarded their revolutionary councils as the prefiguration of a future workers' state (Muldoon 2020: 161; Nixon 2018: 52; Popp-Madsen and Kets 2021: 168–9). Arendt too insists that the federated council system, which emerged at so many different revolutionary movements throughout the past centuries, 'clearly intended to survive the revolution' (Arendt 2006a: 248). Its aim was not merely to topple the bourgeois state, but to replace it – or, in other words, to reconstitute society by imposing itself as its new political form. And it is also at this point that the council may be understood to differ from the public assembly. As discussed above, these assemblies are often precisely regarded as temporary organisational forms or 'anarchist moments' that briefly interrupt the political status quo. If these assemblies were prefigurative, it thus was mostly in a performative sense: they enacted the social and political conditions in which a radically different society might

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be able to emerge. The councils in Arendt's analysis, on the other hand, were also prefigurative in that they sought to provide an institutional framework through which society could be durably re-instituted. It should therefore not surprise us that many recent protest movements eventually shifted to the council as a form of organisation, in an attempt to prolong and expand their prefigurative experiment.

A sixth important feature of the council is that it can emerge in any social context and environment. Although, in principle, the assembly form is not limited to the street, in the context of contemporary social movements it is first and foremost associated with the occupation of public spaces. Ultimately, Butler (2015: 137–8) argues, the street or public square best accommodates the performative dimension of assembling. One of the central features that Arendt attributes to the revolutionary councils of the past century, on the other hand, is precisely that they have 'sprung up everywhere, completely independent of one another' (2006a: 258). They emerged in factories and workshops, but also in neighbourhoods and residential buildings, universities, coffee houses, public offices, military barracks and so on. 'Wherever people were together in whatever kind of public space, they formed councils, and the councils in each of these quite disparate groups transformed a merely haphazard coming together of people into a political institution' (Arendt 2018c: 138). Councils can thus emerge anywhere, at any time, and they are by no means mutually restrictive (Marchart 2005: 135–6; Schaap 2021: 17). Unlike the Republican Senate or bourgeois parliament, which does not tolerate a similar body alongside it, a single council does not claim exclusive jurisdiction over a territory or constituency. And unlike the Greek *polis*, it does not derive its political legitimacy from a law that immures and protects a uniquely political space. A single council, in other words, does not offer an exclusive or sufficient foundation on which an entire political order can be erected. It instead has the potential to politicise *any* activity, environment or shared occupation – any 'accidental proximity', as Arendt calls it (2006a: 259) – and to coexist with other, similarly politicised spaces. Whereas any other form of government implies the concentration of power in a limited set of institutions or offices, in a federated council system power can and must always be further divided. It ultimately derives its authority from its ability to organise from the ground – or, rather, from a plurality of grounds – upward (Arendt 1972b: 230–1).

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It is at this point that Arendt's account of revolutionary councils also differs most emphatically from that of council communists (Popp-Madsen and Kets 2021: 173). Arendt is merely interested in the council as a political institution, and not in its economic functions. She claims that, in most cases, the councils were 'infinitely more interested in the political than in the social aspect of revolution' (Arendt 2006a: 258). In her analysis of the Hungarian uprising, for instance, she distinguishes between workers' councils, which focused on economic matters, and the revolutionary councils that served a political purpose – although she does acknowledge that the difference may not have been as clear-cut in reality (Arendt 2018c: 135). Arendt is not the only one to have developed such a political reading of the revolutionary council. Cornelius Castoriadis also argues that the Hungarian councils emerged in various contexts, and not merely in factories or other sites of production. 'Their exemplary character [did] *not* stem from their being *workers*' councils', he claims, but rather from their strongly participatory character (Castoriadis 1993: 260).

It is argued that this one-sided emphasis on the political features of revolutionary councils is historically inaccurate at best – or even borders on fiction (Muldoon 2020: 9–10; Sitton 1987: 97). But the Arendtian distinction between revolutionary and workers' councils is underpinned by a more encompassing theoretical view. Throughout her oeuvre, Arendt consistently maintains that politics and economics are of an entirely different nature. Economics is typically the realm of fabrication: it serves particular, predefined ends. The aim of economic management thus is to solve problems or overcome certain limitations towards the realisation of such ends. According to Arendt this may inevitably require a certain measure of verticality, and coordination or control from above. For this reason, she argues, 'the question of whether economic matters . . . can be handled by councils – whether, in other words, it is possible to run factories under the management and ownership of their own workers, we shall have to leave open' (2018c: 135). But politics, as we have seen, is distinctively open-ended, and should never be confused with management (Sitton 1987: 89). The aim of the latter is to ameliorate social relations, to settle economic differences, or to coordinate production processes. To put it in Arendt's terms, management is precisely ends-oriented, and typically belongs in a sphere of necessity (Arendt 2006a: 266). Politics, however, seeks to prolong itself over time, and implies that its participants act as equals among each

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other. Though historically contestable, what thus informs Arendt's distinction between economic and political councils is her wish to see the latter as durable institutional spaces in which political action can take place and where differences can be enacted. Their role is to politicise different 'accidental proximities' – or, a range of social contexts and environments (Vatter 2007: 78).

It must be stressed that this politicising function cannot be distinguished from its institutional form. One of the key insights that Arendt claims to derive from Luxemburg is 'the important idea that good organization does not precede action but is the product of it' (Nettl 2019: 504; also quoted in Arendt 1968d: 52). At various moments throughout the past centuries, revolutionary councils have emerged from practice. Their institutions and procedures were not drawn 'around an already existing public space', as we saw was the case in the Greek *polis* (Arendt 1958: 198). Instead, they 'were always organs of order as much as organs of action' – both form and content, the subject or moment of politics as well as its institutional space (Arendt 2006a: 25).[5] It thus follows that the institutional form, laws and procedures of these councils were continuously subject to debate and revision in political practice itself. In this respect, Arendt indeed sees the council as a radical exponent of the republican tradition. Politics pertains precisely to the formation, and continuous augmentation, of the institutional foundations of a community (Honig 1993: 112). The council thus best accommodates prefigurative democracy in that it perceives itself as an 'unfinished project' that always remains open to new beginnings (Kalyvas 2008: 278).

This brings us to the seventh and last important characteristic of the council: namely, that it has the potential to resolve the tension between the open-ended character of prefigurative democracy and its need to acquire a durable institutional form in the long term. As argued, one of the key problems that inform Arendt's political thought is how political action can give rise to a stable and institutional form without losing its distinctive open-endedness and spontaneity. The council offers a solution in that it remains open to continuous amendment or augmentation – thus keeping alive the revolutionary spirit from which it originally emerged. It mediates between constituent power and constituted power (Muldoon 2011: 398; Popp-Madsen 2021: 141). There is always a 'possibility of dis-ordering the existing order and reinventing new institutional frameworks, even if this may generate instability' (Tomba

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2018: 116). At the same time, the council offers an institutional space in which this constant reinvention or augmentation can take place. It thus avoids the 'exhaustion of the constituent power in normal politics' on the one hand (Popp-Madsen 2021: 158), whilst stabilising or pacifying it in a more robust institutional framework on the other (Kalyvas 2008: 276). One may argue that, by striking a precarious balance between revolutionary openness and durable self-organisation, the council reconciles several key aspects that Arendt attributes to various historical forms of government. It combines the Greek principle of *isonomia*, or a political sphere devoid of rulership, with the republican practice of continuous augmentation and re-institutionalisation (Vergara 2020: 204). This may also explain why several recent social movements eventually turned from the public assembly to the council as a form of organisation. Whilst retaining several key features of the assembly (its open-ended, pedagogical and non-hierarchical character), it also allowed these movements to make a next step towards the durable institutionalisation of prefigurative democracy.

However, there is also one important feature of the council that remains largely overlooked in Arendt's account: namely, its symbolic function. As argued above, Arendt does recognise the representative role of councils (or, to be more precise, of its individual members). But this is merely at the level of decision-making and delegation. Something that she does not sufficiently address is how councils as political bodies may also symbolically stand for a larger social group – such as a neighbourhood, a body of workers or employees, or a social class. Such an understanding of the council as a symbolic body of representation can be derived from the work of Rosa Luxemburg.

Luxemburg has often been credited with being one of the few revolutionary Marxists who defended the right to free press, freedom of speech and democratic representation in her polemics against Lenin and Trotsky. According to the Bolsheviks, parliaments and other representative bodies could only reflect the popular will at the very moment of election. As their strategic use was limited, these bodies thus were to be discarded as soon as their revolutionary role had been played out (Luxemburg 1961b: 60–2). Although she was by no means a liberal democrat herself, Luxemburg instead maintained that there was a necessary and legitimate role for representative democracy within a revolutionary politics. She therefore insisted that her own party, the newly founded Communist

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Party of Germany (KPD), continue to pursue an electoral strategy (Luxemburg 1971: 399; Nixon 2018: 45–6). Luxemburg's advocacy of representative democracy was underpinned by a rather idiosyncratic conception of political representation. According to her, representative bodies did not merely serve to voice or transmit the interests or preferences of their constituency. In addition to keeping a check on the 'pulse-beat of the political life of the masses' (Luxemburg 1961b: 62), they also embodied the popular will in a more symbolic or aesthetic sense, as 'the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them' (Luxemburg 1961b: 60). This also explains Luxemburg's appreciation for the soldiers' and workers' councils that emerged during the November Revolution. These councils represented their constituency in a direct or participatory fashion. Its elected members were recallable at any time, and stood in immediate contact with their support base in workshops and factories (Luxemburg 2012: 104; Tomba 2018: 108). But they also represented their support base in a more symbolic sense. 'Only in a permanent and lively exchange between the masses and their political bodies,' Luxemburg argued, 'can the state be filled with a socialist spirit' (Luxemburg 2012: 101). Luxemburg's conception of the council thus seems to be underpinned by a double conception of representation: on the one hand, it pertains to the election or delegation of representatives at various levels of decision-making; on the other hand, it also seems to refer to the way in which a representative body as such embodies the interests, grievances and identity of a social class. Luxemburg's councils also stood for something larger than themselves – in the same way as recent public assemblies in Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park presented a 'living image' of the people that they claimed to represent (Frank 2021: 70). I will return to this specific aspect of representation and its relevance for prefigurative democracy in the next chapter.

Conclusion: Towards a Prefigurative Democracy

How can prefigurative democracy be institutionalised, and thus acquire a more durable form, whilst maintaining its distinctive open-endedness? Recent prefigurative movements often organised in public assemblies. This organisational form indeed has a number of important prefigurative characteristics, as the public assembly enacts the political form and social conditions of a possible future society.

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Yet, as argued, the public assembly often has a temporary character. Various recent movements have therefore gradually turned to organise in spokescouncils, city councils and neighbourhood assemblies. Arendt's discussion of revolutionary councils throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century helps us to understand how prefigurative democracy may acquire a more durable and stable institutional form whilst preserving some of the key features that characterise the public assembly.

On the one hand, the council may be understood to nourish a number of features that have also been attributed to the public assembly: its distinctive open-endedness and spontaneous character, an absence of rulership and hierarchy, its disdain for electoral-representative government and political parties, and an important pedagogical function. But in addition to this, and unlike the public assembly, revolutionary councils seek to prefigure a durable political structure as they intend to outlive the moment of revolution. They also have a broader politicising role in that they can emerge in any social context or environment and serve to politicise these various 'proximities'. Finally, councils are 'organs of order as much as organs of action' (Arendt 2006a: 25), since they are open to continuous self-reform and augmentation. Council democracy may thus be understood to maintain a precarious balance between the extraordinary and insurrectionary moment of political foundation on the one hand, and a 'normal politics' that grants a certain measure of durability and stability to our public lives on the other. It combines key features that Arendt attributes to various historical forms of government, such as the ancient Greek principle of *isonomia* and the Roman idea of politics as a continuous augmentation of its own foundations.

My point is not to argue that, when left to itself, prefigurative democracy must necessarily give rise to a council system. Nor is it to claim that the council is the only possible institutional form through which it may acquire more durability and stability, or even to suggest that prefigurative democracy should necessarily seek its own institutionalisation. There may be good reasons not to prolong a prefigurative movement or practice. But there often appears to be a strong urge to retain the prefigurative moment and to institutionalise it in one way or the other. Moreover, as argued, there is a certain tendency in prefigurative practices towards the establishment of political councils. Arendt's political conception of the council may help us to look beyond the public assembly or the activist tent camp

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and imagine what a more durable prefigurative democracy might look like in the long term.

Of course, this inevitably also gives rise to new questions. Assemblies and councils do not only establish a public space that accommodates the exchange of ideas and public deliberation, as Arendt is keen to stress. They also embody a larger social group and speak on its behalf. How can such a political body represent something or someone that is larger than itself? One more feature that public assemblies and councils seem to have in common is that both present a symbolic image of the group or people that they claim to stand for. Although Arendt recognises the representative function of councils, this symbolic aspect of representation seems to escape her account. In order to understand this representative aspect of prefigurative democracy we need to draw on a different strand of radical-democratic thought. In the next chapter I therefore turn to Ernesto Laclau's theory of political representation.

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